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# Marcion and Luke-Acts: a defining struggle

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## **Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle**

Joseph B. Tyson

Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006

xii + 192 pages, \$39.95 Softcover

Joseph B. Tyson's monograph *Marcion and Luke-Acts* has helped resurrect important debates in New Testament scholarship in a clear and convincing fashion. The reader finds out rather quickly that the immediate focus of the study involves dating the canonical Gospel of Luke and its companion volume the Acts of the Apostles in the 120s C.E., specifically as a response to the Pauline enthusiast Marcion and his movement. Not only does this challenge the conventional dating of Luke-Acts (c. 85 C.E.), but it brings once again to the fore a position advocated in the early 1940s by the author's mentor, John Knox. Tyson does not argue for the originality of his views; rather he acknowledges the work done by others in defending Knox's and similar positions. However, the thoroughness and clarity of his arguments within the debate, and his clear summary of scholarship on the issue (pro and con), make this work an excellent scholarly contribution specifically in the field of both Lukan and Marcionite studies and more generally in the development of early Christianity and the canon.

It is worthwhile, I think, to list some of the specific positions Tyson takes by well-structured and clear argumentation, blending his own thinking with other scholars in the field, both predecessors and contemporaries:

1. Excellent reconstructions not only of Marcion and his impact but also his Gospel, all the while pointing out how very seriously "Proto-Orthodox" folk took him.
2. A convincing case for dating Luke and Acts or Luke-Acts in the 120s C.E. over against the 80s or even the 60s C.E.
3. A well-developed case that the author of Luke-Acts created a strong anti-Marcionite theology via harmonization of Paul with Peter and the Jerusalem leaders, via a different view of apostleship, and by linking all early leaders of the Jesus movement to both Jewish Scripture and Jewish practice. In short Luke-Acts pushes the continuity of old and new while Marcion asserts a total discontinuity.

Beyond these very specific and pointed analyses Tyson presents us with other highly useful scholarly gifts. In the study of early Christianity where issues of dating and sources are so very important, the author demonstrates a brilliance of dating and source critical scholarship that could be used successfully in training budding intellectuals in these areas. I found his case for the canonical Lukan author's and Marcion's use of an earlier version of the Gospel of Luke quite convincing over against the more traditional notion that Marcion corrupted canonical Luke. Indeed, Tyson spends much time and space arguing how and why both Marcion and canonical Luke might have used an Ur-Luke. Especially intriguing are Tyson's interpretations of the infancy narratives and the resurrection accounts in Luke 24. His arguments demonstrate as well that he does not succumb to a subliminal orthodoxy, found in so many scholars in the field, which finds the need to portray Marcion's work as a breakaway from accepted tradition. In short, he does not build a scholarly apparatus upon the foundation of Irenaeus' and Tertullian's polemics over against the "heretic" Marcion. Instead his scholarship recognizes a second century situation where the new movement was still struggling to define itself. In this context Tyson constructs an excellent case for battles surrounding the creation of a sacred canon.

Especially intriguing was his challenge to the prevailing notion that Marcion was the arch-antisemite over against the "Proto-Orthodox" folks (including the author of Luke-Acts) who accepted the faith and canon of Israel as part of their own foundational faith. However, Tyson points out that subsequent history of the interface of Jews and increasingly Gentile Christians gives one scant cause for rejoicing. Although Tyson recognizes that we can never know the end result of Jewish-Christian relations had Marcionism become the defining force in the new movement, he hypothesizes that total discontinuity might have led to a "live and let live" stance. Who knows? In any event, using Marcion as a scapegoat for anti-Semitism (anti-Judaism) is, at best, an historical cop-out and, at worst, sheer hypocrisy.

In spite of my almost unequivocal praise of this book, I offer a challenge to one of his points. Tyson asserts (p. 48): "Some of the letters reveal that there was serious contention about Paul's theology and activity even during his lifetime, but afterward there seems to have been a long silence about him. Little attention seems to have

been paid to him, except by Marcion and his followers.” I am convinced that the extant evidence does not uphold such a contention. I cite a few examples:

1. The deutero-Pauline epistles (Colossians and Ephesians), which I believe were not written by Paul and seem theologically to predate Marcion, claim Pauline authority for their positions.
2. Perhaps the Pastorals (also claiming Pauline authority) date from Marcion’s time. Nonetheless, they address themselves chiefly to issues unrelated to debates with Marcionism.
3. Finally, the Acts of Paul and Thecla do not seem to address the chief divisions between Marcion and the Proto-Orthodox folk.

In short, I think that Paul’s name carried weight in sectors of the new movement apart from Marcion; otherwise why would Marcion’s foes need to co-opt Paul? If Marcion were the almost exclusive Paulinist of the period why not dismiss him along with Marcion? On the other hand, if Paul’s name were important among Jesus believers, then he had to be “rescued” from Marcion. Perhaps this is the context of II Peter 3:15-16 which, instead of dismissing Paul, upholds his writing as scriptural, though often distorted (by Marcion?). I do not question that Marcion was one of the notable and brilliant followers of Paul but not the only one committed to the survival of Paul as an apostolic figure of authority. In conclusion, however, I underscore that my dispute on this one issue with Tyson does not weaken my high regard for this fine work of scholarship. It engaged me from cover to cover. I recommend it highly to one and all.

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